

# **Substantiating the elusive language of partnerships for development: FROM 'equitable' TO reflexive, dialogical and honest**

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# My background & relevant initiatives

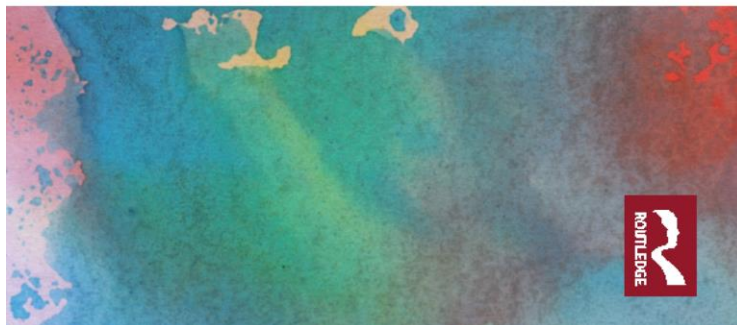
- Critical international development researcher and practitioner committed to bridging theory with practice and scholarship with lived experiences.
- Initiated the Decolonising Research Initiative at SOAS with a conversation event that brought funders, institutions and research managers to apply a decolonial lens to research structures
- Currently co-coordinating the SOAS-OXFORD Research for Development (R4D) Series, which aims to change the narrative around development research and to encourage ethical, reflexive and dialogical research practices internationally
- Acting as SOAS's GCRF Project Officer, focusing on improving SOAS processes in building strong and healthy international collaborative research with partners in Asia, Africa and the Middle East



# **ADAPTING GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT TO LOCAL RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS**

**A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE  
IN ETHIOPIA**

Romina Istratii



# Agenda

- Examining the language of development and the problem of elusiveness
- The concept of 'equitable' partnerships in Research for Development
- Limitations with the SDGs
- The problems of 'impact'
- Substantiating 'partnerships' for development
- Some directions moving forward
- The COVID-19 pandemic: challenges & opportunities

# Some working definitions: epistemology and ‘situated’ knowledge

- When I speak of epistemology I refer to a system of criteria and standards for validating what counts as knowledge, “which is ultimately linked to worldview.” (Ladson-Billings 2005, 258).
- We need to recognise that all individuals are “epistemologically situated” (Istratii 2017, 4). Situated knowledge is knowledge that is informed by one’s belief and knowledge systems, preconceptions and theoretical assumptions.
- Historically, western epistemology has dominated and this has been embedded in colonial and post-Enlightenment legacies. International development built on the legacy of the ‘civilising mission’ (Manji and O’Coill 2002, Rist 2014)
- It is important that we understand how our development research or practice approaches are informed or limited by our situated knowledge and be reflexive and transparent about these effects and their implications.



# The epistemological and practical dangers of international development language

- Euphemisms risk replacing substance when development language describes an ideal or a politically correct version of reality but not empirical realities – thus international development concepts tend to become ‘myths’, ‘buzzwords’ or ‘development speak’
- Due to its elusiveness, terminology offers few concrete directions of how to achieve the concept signified
- Language use can perpetuate epistemological hierarchies (e.g. developing/developed countries).
- Simplified, generic or symbolic language can obfuscate local conceptual repertoires and embodied experiences, which are crucial for understanding the aetiologies of local issues and for alleviating these effectively and in locally relevant ways.



# ‘Equitable partnerships’ in funding for development

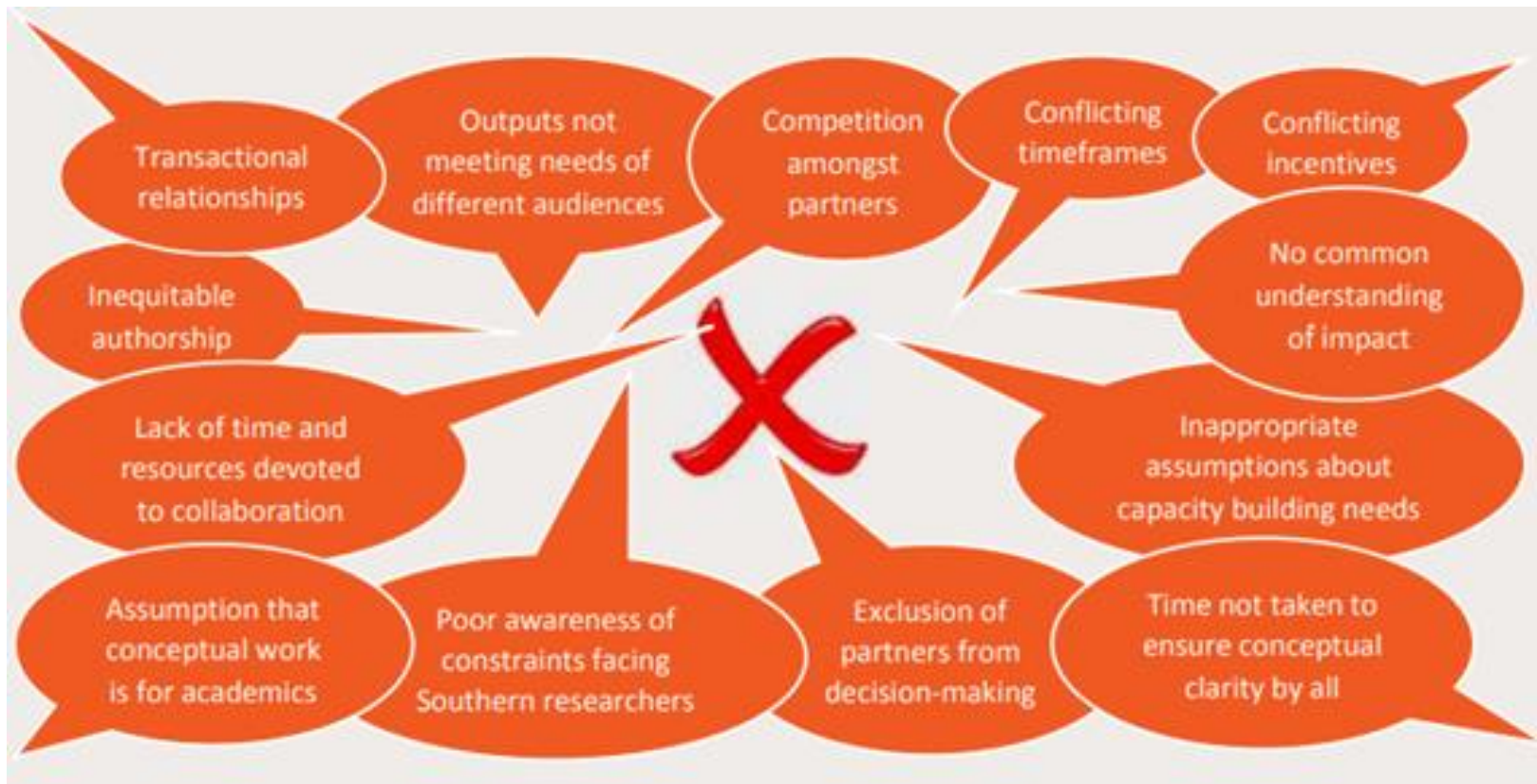
- Emphasis is placed on interdisciplinarity and partnerships-building through collaborative research projects involving researchers from the UK and aid recipient countries (DAC listed countries) to address ‘global challenges’.
- ‘Co-production’, ‘capacity-building’, ‘equitable partnerships’ and ‘impact’ are funder priorities (GCRF Criteria 2017).
- These priorities align with emerging evidence that research and international development practice have more impact when they proceed under co-production and co-authorship principles (Adams and Gurney 2016; Fransman 2019).



# The elusive language of equitable partnerships

- Despite an increasing attention to gender inequality (evidenced in the introduction of UKRI's Gender Equality Statement in April 2019), how equitable partnerships are to be achieved when teams are cross-cultural and thus imbricated in post-colonial power hierarchies and simultaneously comprised of researchers of multiple intersectional identities has not been given thoughtful consideration.
- Structural and material factors suggest that equitable partnerships are, in some aspects, unrealisable. Eligibility criteria and due diligence expectations place more decision-making power, accountability and, thus, epistemological and material benefits in the hands of the UK-based PI.
- While cross-sectoral partnerships are encouraged, there is no thorough discussion of the challenges of working across sectors (academia, NGOs, government agencies), especially in the international or LMIC context.

# Systemic barriers to equitable partnerships



Source: UKRI, 'Promoting Equitable and Fair Research Partnerships', p. 8.

# Limitations of the SDGs discourse

- Despite the benefits there might exist in having a common language and goals to work towards, we need to be aware of the limitations that the narrative of 'global challenges' entails.
- Due to the existing epistemological and material inequalities, the priorities identified may not necessarily reflect local understandings of development issues, priorities or needs.
- For instance, an AHRC-funded series of workshops that explored the extent to which the SDGs integrated or found resonance with faith-based organisations in three different geographical contexts (Ethiopia, India and the UK), evidenced that such integration was weak (Tomalin, Haustein and Kidy 2018).
- The exclusive focus on the SDGs, which tend to be associated with LMICs, can hinder interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary research design and collaboration between high-income countries (HICs) and LMICs (e.g. in tackling public health challenges) – no two-way knowledge exchange to solve shared problems

# Problematic conceptualisations of impact

- In development research, impact has been understood in the context of ODA-related research funding - usually not disconnected from the notion of value for money (VfM).
- The concept is predicated primarily to the idea of economic growth, which needs to be demonstrated within the timelines and according to the standards set out by the funder. Such conceptualisations and timelines for producing impact do not easily accommodate the types of intricate, long-term and multi-dimensional changes or effects sought in social scientific and humanities research or culture-sensitive development interventions.
- Impact can be understood very differently depending on the positionality of the stakeholder (western/international Lead/Organisation, LMIC researchers, LMIC communities, etc.). Whose conceptualisation of impact will prevail when funding availability and other structural parameters place more power in PIs/Leads/Organisations from HICs?





# Substantiating ‘partnerships’ for ‘development’

- Whether a project will achieve effective and fruitful partnerships will depend on how it is structured and how the project idea is developed – when it is developed by a single non-local PI/Lead/Organisation, local partners or research personnel brought into the project at later stages are unlikely to influence the direction of the research/project.
- Partnerships can become effective when projects are conceptualised in dialogue with researchers, communities and other involved stakeholders and when all sides have clear expectations about the project’s objectives and approach and their role in it.
- It is an imperative to take a contextualised approach to understanding local issues and to suspend easy assumptions or explanations only because the language is available. When we truly engage with communities, their conceptualisations of problems and their lived experiences, we achieve the realness factor that international development language often lacks.

# Some suggestions to achieve strong, reflexive and dialogical partnerships

- Be reflexive of your limitations and honest about the expectations of the project.
- Consider how to accommodate multi-vocal narratives in the conceptualisation of projects and engage local researchers or community-based stakeholders of diverse backgrounds to peer review the projects.
- Encourage linguistic training when undertaking local community work - having translators has limitations. Speaking local languages does not eschew these issues, but it helps to build understanding and earn people's respect and trust.
- Attribute and credit the work fairly regardless of the rank of the personnel involved. Be aware of not encouraging local hierarchies (e.g. where most senior name is included in projects, but the work is delegated to lower-ranking staff who are not explicitly acknowledged).
- Consider issues of intellectual property and ensure that local researchers and stakeholders can publish the research they produce to have local impact - subcontracting needs to be regulated if it cannot be ascertained that consultants will be credited and will have shared IP of work.

# Challenges & Opportunities in the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic era

- The development industry has been affected in many ways: mobility and travel being restricted, programmes being delayed or discontinued, institutions having to change their modus operandi, etc.
- However, the situation has also mobilised local research to address both the epidemiological and development challenges.
  - The public health crisis has led local development agents to communicate virtually, enabling new forms of collaboration (Dr Ephrem Tesema, Social Development Adviser, Ethiopia)
  - Africa-led and Asia-led scientific research to investigate context specific questions (Dr Judy Omumbo, Programme Manager, African Academy of Sciences, Kenya)



# Challenges & Opportunities in the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic era (cont.)

- The pandemic can bring changes contributing to the decolonisation of this field.
  - If non-local PIs/Leads or organisational staff are facing mobility challenges, this might leave some room for local counterparts to take the lead.
  - The travel bans mean fewer conferences and meetings that have tended to be reserved for those in elite roles and high ranking positions.
  - The changes in modus operandi, from physical to virtual, could boost more dialogical collaborations all steps of project design and implementation.
  - The crisis evidences that LMICS have a wealth of knowledge in addressing public health crisis and can, in fact, advise HICs in this domain – two-way knowledge exchange and shared learning.

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